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ABSTRACT

A multifaceted approach to adult development was empirically tested with 449 adult students enrolled in a large metropolitan community college system in the midwest. This approach suggests that most adults assume multiple life roles (relationship with self, with work, with others, and with family). The Adult Life Roles Instrument was designed to assess the multifaceted approach and to test the hypothesis that adult development is variable across active life roles. Tasks were selected and grouped according to the common roles present in the adult life cycle, and adult life task statements were categorized into four phases (initiation, adaptation, reassessment, and reconciliation). Results indicated the following: adults perceive themselves in various phases of their active life roles; most adults report a significant amount of diversity; 40% of those who are engaged in all six roles place themselves in all four phases; those involved in fewer than six life roles respond in much the same manner as those involved in all six roles; adult development can be viewed as a dynamic process dependent upon separate aspects of one's life; and there are few variations between genders. Tables are included. Contains 24 references. (SM)

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ADULT LIFE ROLES: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF A MULTIFACETED APPROACH TO ADULT DEVELOPMENT

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A common theme among adult development theories is that adults exhibit relatively predictable behavior patterns during certain age-related periods in their lives. However, dramatic fluctuations in society have necessitated a re-examination of adult development theories and their assumptions. It can no longer be assumed that all adults will follow a linear path of development through life. Family structures are changing as divorce and remarriage become common occurrences. Many adults are highly mobile, requiring them to re-establish friendships and community associations several times during adulthood. The need for additional education is often required of adults who wish to succeed in a changing technological society. As adults' lives change, they must learn new skills to adapt to those changes. Perhaps Neugarten (1980) describes it best when she states:

> Chronological age is becoming a poorer and poorer predictor of the way people live. An adult's age no longer tells you anything about that person's economic or marital status, style of life, or health. Somewhere after the first 20 years, age falls away as a predictor.... Lives are more fluid. There's no longer a particular year - or even a particular decade - in which one marries or enters the labor market or goes to school or has children. (p.66)

The purpose of this study was to empirically test a multifaceted approach to adult development proposed by Hughes & Graham (1985) to

address the variability that can be observed in adult development. This approach was developed after a review of the literature on adult development and from discussions with adult education practitioners and adults themselves. An investigation into the accuracy of this multifaceted approach is particularly relevant to postsecondary institutions as they seek new ways to respond to adults' needs for education, whether it be to retrain for new careers or to enhance the quality of their lives. The dynamics of the adult development process must be understood by educational providers in order for them to effectively attract, serve, and retrain the growing number of adults seeking the services of their institutions.

Cross (1982) and Merriam (1984) have summarized the literature and research on adult development and have identified two broad themes for explaining adult development theories. The first approach includes the sequential or "developmental" theories which focus on the growth and change in adults as a process that requires resolution of dichotomous constructs that occur at certain stages during adult life.

The notion of dichotomous constructs gained acceptance with the work of Erickson (1950). He proposed that adulthood was comprised of stages, each of which contained a developmental crisis involving opposing constructs. Resolution of this conflict was required before an individual could move to the next stage. Other theorists (Chickering, 1969, 1981; Havighurst, 1953, 1972; Kohlberg, 1973; Loevinger, 1976; Perry, 1970) have proposed models similar to Erikson's, viewing adult development in terms of specific personality components that undergo a process of growth

and change over a total life continuum. By implication, these life continuums are hierarchical and generally emphasize a specific aspect of development; such as ego development (Chickering, 1981; and Loevinger, 1976), cognitive development (Perry, 1970), and moral development (Kohlberg, 1973).

The second approach includes the phases of life or life cycle theories. Theorists ascribing to this approach (Gould, 1972; Levinson, Darrow, Klien, Levinson, and McKee, 1978; Lowenthal, Thurner & Chiriboga, 1975; and Sheehy, 1976), tend to also view adulthood as being divided into stages. However, they maintain stronger chronological ties for each phase and focus on specific tasks that must be accomplished during each phase or cycle.

Several researchers have challenged the assumptions and implications of both approaches to adult development which tend to emphasize age and/or linear progression through adulthood. Neugarten (1978) has expanded the concept of developmental stages by stating that age, the structure of society, the internalization of age norms, and age-group identification provide a social and cultural context for viewing adult development. Peck (1986) has questioned whether or not adult development theories are applicable to women's definition of self. Kuh and Thomas (1983) found that graduate students did not behave in ways that were consistent with the predicted behavior patterns of developmental stages suggested by Gould (1978), Levinson et. al. (1978), and Sheehy (1976).

The multifaceted approach to adult development advanced by Hughes,

Graham, and Galbraith (1986) suggested that most adults assume multiple life roles; the most common ones being a relationship with self, a relationship with work, a relationship with others, and a relationship with family. A life role was defined as a general aspect of an adult's life that was viewed in conjunction with the other roles and included the socially defined tasks and expectations for behavior. The framework proposed that adults assume different life roles at varying times and can move in and out of these life roles depending on the experiences and triggering events in their lives.

Movement through each life role occurs in a cycle consisting of four phases: initiation, adaptation, reassessment, and reconciliation. The first phase of **initiation** is the time of engagement in the life role which includes the individualized learning and the assumption of the tasks and socially defined expectations for behaviors in the life role. During the **adaptation** phase the adult assimilates and adjusts to the expectations and requirements of the life role. In the third phase, **reassessment**, adults are involved in the examination of the expectations and tasks of the life role. During this phase, adults seek to establish personal relevance and meaning to their involvement in the life role. The final phase, **reconciliation**, is a time of reflection on all aspects of the life role and a lessening of involvement with it.

To illustrate further, consider adults who engage in the life role of work and do not engage in the family life role until they are well-established in their careers. These adults would be "advanced" or "developed" in the work life role, but inexperienced in the tasks and behaviors of life roles they

have not assumed. Therefore, they might be in the adaptation stage in their relationship with work before they ever engage in the life role which includes relationships with family.

As adults grow and change they individually experience life roles at different times and may even exit them and re-enter the same life roles in a new context. With this "cycling", they may return to the initial stage of the life role. However, because of their familiarity with the tasks, expectations, and behaviors of the life role, it can be expected that they will progress quickly through the stages they have previously experienced. An illustration of this would be adults who move from one community to another. When they leave one community they are leaving friends and community associations thereby exiting the life role which includes relationships with others in that community. It is likely that they will re-engage in that life role in the new community where they will again be involved in the initial tasks and behaviors associated with the initiation stage, that of establishing friendships and associations. This re-cycling phenomena would occur whenever adults re-engage in a life role previously experienced.

Triggering events (Knox, 1977) often cause adults to make changes in existing life roles or to engage in new life roles. These are events that occur in adulthood that cause a person to become motivated to change, to adopt a new lifestyle, to seek additional training or education, or to accomodate new life roles. Knox has identified several triggering events such as transferring to a new job, divorce, birth of a child, retirement, discovering new talents or interests, children leaving home, disability, as well as many others. These

events serve as stimuli for change in adulthood and lead to dynamic and variable development across life roles.

In summary, a multifaceted view of adult development perceives development as a dynamic interaction of the various life roles one assumes during adult life. Adult development is not linear or even equal in all aspects of life but rather varies across the different life roles. Development occurs in the phases according to a complex interaction between the person, the environment, societal demands, and the triggering events that confront one in adulthood. This particular study was undertaken to determine how adults evaluate themselves across a variety of life roles and to assess the similarities or differences that could be viewed in adult development.

METHODOLOGY

The Adult Life Roles Instrument (ALRI) was designed to assess the multifaceted approach and to test the hypothesis that adult development was variable across active life roles. Active life roles were defined as those roles in which adults were currently engaged or actively involved. The instrument was designed by identifying and adapting adult life task statements from the work of Knowles (1984), Knox (1977), and McCoy (1977). The tasks were selected and grouped according to the common roles present in the adult life cycle (e.g. relationship with work, family, community, self). These statements were then categorized into the four phases outlined above: initiation, adaptation, reassessment, and

reconciliation. This method provided a good measure of content validity by drawing upon the commonly identified adult life tasks. To further enhance specificity, two of the four general life roles were subdivided to include six separate life roles: relationships with 1) self, 2) friends, 3) community, 4) spouse or partner, 5) children, and 6) work.

The instrument was pilot tested and reviewed by adult education practitioners and faculty members in the field of adult and higher education. Modifications were made to the ALRI based on the pilot testing and the reviews. To prevent response bias, the task statements were ordered randomly and no designation or label was listed. Subjects were also given the option of indicating that they were not participating in a given life role (e.g. approximately 56% indicated they did not have children).

The subjects for the study were 449 adult students enrolled in a large metropolitan community college system in the midwest United States. They were chosen through the random selection of 42 different evening classes distributed throughout the district's three separate campuses. The instructors for the courses administered the ALRI to the students attending the classes and collected them during the same class period. Through the use of follow-up telephone calls and letters, 87% or 34 of the 39* instructors completed the activity and returned the completed ALRI's for scoring. Though a total of 455 questionnaires were completed, 6 were unusable due to incompleteness.

*Two classes were not in session during the administration period and one instructor violated the administration protocol.

A counting scheme was designed to determine whether or not the adults perceived themselves to be in various stages of development across their life roles. Individuals were grouped according to how many different phases they were in, based on the total number of life roles in which they participated. This counting scheme was used to assess the degree of variability perceived by the adults and to determine the total range of variability for the sample.

Since there has been much discussion on gender variations in adult development, the data were also analyzed to determine whether or not gender had any effect on the life cycle phases. Because the ALRI utilized an ordinal scale to assess the life role phases, a chi square test of statistical significance was selected for use in the analysis and the alpha value to test the hypothesis was set at .05. Additionally, two-way cross tabulation tables were designed to review the various response categories and provide an overall view of the subjects responses. Due to the common characteristics of adult student populations, an analysis assessing any variance in age among the two sexes was also conducted. The statistical analysis indicated that there was no statistical association between age and sex among the sample selected for this study.

RESULTS

The results of the analysis of the Adult Life Role Instrument strongly indicated that adults perceived themselves in various phases of their active

life roles. In fact, not only did adults perceive themselves in different phases in their active roles, most reported a significant amount of diversity. For example, among those who responded that they were involved in three or more different life roles (n=432), only two percent reported that they were in the same phase across all their life roles.

Among those individuals who were engaged in all six different life roles (n=139), almost forty percent placed themselves in all four different phases and another fifty-three percent reported they were in three different developmental phases. The remaining 8.7% reported they were in two different phases and none of the respondents indicated they were in the same phase across all roles.

In general, those involved in fewer than six life roles responded in much the same manner as those involved in all six roles. Anywhere from sixty to ninety percent of the individuals in each category reported they were in almost as many phases as life roles. Table 1 depicts the responses by category and indicates the amount of developmental diversity perceived by the adults.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The statistical analysis of the phases according to gender did not indicate any statistical differences in five of the six identified life roles. No statistical variations were present among the life roles assessing relationships with friends, community, partner, self, or work. Not only did

the statistical tests fail to meet the preset alpha value of .05, but few if any variations among responses could be viewed by a careful examination of the cross tabulation tables. In short, gender did not seem to have a major impact on the individuals responses to their development among five of the six life roles. (See table 2).

In respect to the life role assessing the relationship with children, a quite different picture emerged. Gender was highly associated with the responses to life role phases. Generally, males were much more likely to see themselves in the initial phase (i.e. planning a family) with almost a quarter of the subjects reporting this response. Women were much less likely to place themselves in this phase of development, with less than 10% indicating this level. On the otherhand, women were more than twice as likely as men to report that they were in the phase of accepting their children as individuals (18.9% females vs. 8.6% males).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This research indicated that adults perceived a significant amount of developmental diversity across the various active life roles. Evidence was obtained that adult development can be viewed as a dynamic process dependent upon separate aspects of one's life. These preliminary findings tend to lend support for the multifaceted approach to adult development earlier proposed by Hughes and Graham (1985).

One of the most intriguing findings of this research was the amount of

diversity perceived by adults. While the original hypothesis was that adults would perceive variation in the phases of their active life roles, the findings indicated that many adults placed themselves in all four different phases. This finding lends support to the notion that while there are common elements for age groupings, by no means are they universal. Furthermore, it suggests that adults address and solve life events and dilemmas at different rates and times.

Another significant finding was that there appeared to be few variations between genders. In five of the six roles both sexes responded in similar fashions. This finding appears to contradict the hypothesis presented by Peck (1986) and others who have suggested men and women experience different developmental patterns. Given the unique roles and societal expectations for men and women, this finding was surprising and presents some unsolved questions. Clearly, additional research needs to be conducted to provide more evidence on this issue.

The findings from this research indicate that life cycle theorists such as Gould (1972), Levinson (1978), Lowenthal (1975) and Sheehy (1976) may not go far enough in identifying the entire process of adult growth. It also raises some questions about the developmental theorists who tend to suggest that development is unidimensional and reflects all aspects of an adults life. While most of these theorists acknowledge the presence of life roles and the diversity present in them, few have actually addressed the complexity.

The preliminary findings from this research are most consistent with

the ideas proposed by Neugarten (1978) or the findings of Kuh & Thomas (1983). Kuh and Thomas found that graduate students did not behave in ways consistent with those predicted by the life cycle theorists. Neugarten has proposed that the structure of society and the social and cultural context provide a basis for viewing adult development. The findings from this study appear to support both these perspectives.

Colleges and universities and other organizations providing adult education may need to attend to the diversity present within individuals. Short workshops can be developed to help adults identify developmental goals, the expectations of others in their related life roles, and the issues related to "returning to school". Support groups can be organized to enable adult students to cope with the associated aspects of their lives that will be affected by their involvement in education.

The multifaceted approach also has implications for teaching. When adults engage in education, it is often assumed that they have a high level of "maturity" in directing their own learning. This may not always to the case, even though they are advanced in other aspects of their life. Actually, these adults could be in the early phases of development in the education role and need assistance with the expectations and tasks to enhance their learning success. Once again, short workshops that help adults identify previously learned skills could provide assistance. In addition, an understanding of the life role approach might help faculty avoid placing unrealistic expectations on adult students who have recently re-entered school.

Interactions with practitioners in the field of adult education suggests

that the multifaceted approach to adult development is a useful tool for understanding adult behavior. While other authors have discussed this diversity, this approach provides a conceptual framework to actually formalize many of the constructs. A number of practitioners have indicated that the framework was useful and easy to understand and has helped them grasp the problems and issues that adult students face. This study tends to lend preliminatry empirical support to this approach.

In contemporary society it is probably not sufficient to view adult development as a linear progression with one stage or cycle reflecting the total development of a person. Today individuals assume many roles and can be viewed as more or less "developed" or "mature" within them. Assuming these various life roles exist, further attention needs to be given to the interaction between them and a way of conceptualizing them. This more complex conceptualization will assist educators as they strive to address the needs of their changing populations.

TABLE 1
NUMBER OF DIFFERENT STAGES CATEGORIZED BY INVOLVEMENT IN LIFE ROLES

Individuals engaged in 6 different life roles N=139 (30.9%)

53	38.1%	4 different phases
74	53.2%	3 different phases
12	8.7%	2 different phases
0	0.0%	all roles same phase

Individuals engaged in 5 different life roles N=132 (29.3%)

24	18.2%	4 different phases
84	63.6%	3 different phases
23	17.0%	2 different phases
1	.8%	all roles same phase

Individuals engaged in 4 different life roles N=110 (24.5%)

5	(4.5%)	4 different phases
62	(56.4%)	3 different phases
41	(37.3%)	2 different phases
2	(1.8%)	all roles same phase

Individuals engaged in 3 different life roles N=51 (11.3%)

11	(21.5%)	3 different phases
35	(68.7%)	2 different phases
5	(9.8%)	all roles same phase

Individuals engaged in 2 different life roles N=13 (2.8%)

8	*	2 different phases
5	*	all roles same phase

Individuals engaged in 1 life role N=5 (1.1%)

*numbers too small to present percentage of responses

TABLE 2
STATISTICAL COMPARISON OF LIFE CYCLE PHASES BY GENDER

LIFE ROLES

Friends life role	$X^2 = 5.31$	df = 4	p = .257
Community life role	$X^2 = 1.98$	df = 4	p = .739
Partner life role	$X^2 = 3.84$	df = 4	p = .428
Self life role	$X^2 = 7.76$	df = 4	p = .101
Work life role	$X^2 = 2.75$	df = 4	p = .601
Children life role	$X^2 = 20.50$	df = 4	p = .0001*

*statistically significant at .05 level

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